



Alabama

Alabama's haunted hospitals struggle to find new life after closure



[<http://connect.al.com/user/AmyYurk/index.html>] By Amy Yurkanin | ayurkanin@al.com [<http://connect.al.com/user/AmyYurk/posts.html>]

Email the author | Follow on Twitter [<https://twitter.com/AmyKingsley4>]

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It's not hard to find a haunted hospital in Alabama – even when it's not October. Almost 20 hospitals have moved or closed since 2000, often leaving behind spooky relics that sit there for years, gathering cobwebs and ghost stories as they struggle to find new tenants.

Trinity Medical Center was the latest hospital to go dark in Alabama. A convoy of ambulances moved 98 patients out of the old hospital and into Grandview Medical Center on U.S. 280 earlier this month.

Walter Brown, vice president of the office group for Graham & Company, is leading the effort to find a new buyer – and a new use – for the old hospital.

"We've worked on challenging redevelopment projects in the past, but never a hospital campus," Brown said.

A survey of hospitals that have recently closed shows just how difficult the task might be. Just two out of eight hospitals that closed in 2012 and 2013 have been reopened in some capacity.

Cooper Green Mercy Hospital in Birmingham closed as an acute care hospital at the end of 2012, but reopened immediately as an outpatient facility. The former Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital now houses a 16-bed crisis stabilization unit and administrative offices for the Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority.

But Hartselle Medical Center, Searcy Hospital, Infirmary West, Chilton Medical Center, Elba General Hospital and Florala Memorial Hospital still sit empty, years after they closed their doors.

That doesn't surprise Barton DeLacy, a Chicago-based real estate consultant who chaired a committee in 2011 to explore potential uses for Trinity Medical Center.

"What happens to dead hospitals? Sadly, it's very seldom that they are repurposed in any meaningful way," DeLacy said.

It's difficult to sell an old hospital as is, because they quickly become obsolete as healthcare facilities, DeLacy said. And remodeling them for other uses is expensive and difficult. DeLacy and Brown both said the most marketable structures on Trinity's 75-acre campus are the parking garages and professional office buildings.

"The hospital building itself will be difficult to retrofit for other uses," Brown said. "It will likely be demolished."

Trinity Medical Center was about 50 years old when it closed, after decades of upgrades and additions that added beds but may have made the building less appealing to other businesses.

"After a while, you get this jumble of brick and mortar that is hard to do much with," DeLacy said.

DeLacy said hospitals located downtown have better potential for redevelopment. Recently, an old hospital complex in Jersey City was redeveloped as condominiums, he said. But the property benefited from a prime downtown location and historic Art Deco architecture.

Hospitals without those advantages may languish for years. Cobb Memorial Hospital in Phenix City closed in 2002, according to the Alabama Hospital Association. The city purchased the property in 2011, and city council members laid out ambitious plans for a \$12 million municipal complex. Demolition began in 2012.

The hospital is gone, but little has happened with the land where it stood, said Phenix City Mayor Eddie Lowe.

"What happens to dead hospitals? Sadly, it's very seldom that they are

Lowe said the city plans to develop a park – Homage Military Park – to honor soldiers lost in battle. City leaders announced the project in 2013, and sought \$3.5 million from private donors. Work cannot begin on the park until the city raises more money, he said.

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[http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://al.com/news/index.ssf/2015/10/alabamas_haunted_hospitals_str.html]

Henry Parker, executive director of the authority, said the building sat on an existing bus line, and was able to find a new home.

"Every consumer in our area seemed to know where the old Greil Hospital was," Parker said.

The authority had to remodel some of the areas for offices and outpatient treatment, and may have to spend up to \$500,000 to replace the roof. But overall, the old hospital has functioned well, Parker said.

"It's been a win-win for the community," he added.

Greil isn't the only positive story. The state of Alabama bought the old St. Margaret's Hospital in Montgomery in 2001, more than a decade after the hospital closed. Several state agencies, including the Department of Corrections, have offices there.

The University of Alabama agreed to buy the old Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa in 2010 after the Department of Mental Health decided to build a new facility. Parts of the building will be demolished to make way for more classrooms and theater space, according to a university spokesman.

But the owners of Trinity Medical Center, Tennessee-based Community Health Systems, don't have to look far to find a more dismal possible outcome for the abandoned hospital. Physicians Medical Center Carraway in Norwood closed in October 2008, and has stood empty ever since.

Officials briefly considered moving a psychiatric hospital to the site, which was subsequently purchased by executives of the Lovelady Center – a drug treatment and rehabilitation center for women. None of the plans proposed for the hospital ever materialized.

DeLacy said Trinity has a better location near Forest Park and Mountain Brook that may make it more marketable than Carraway.

The site could be suitable for senior housing, DeLacy said, but seniors are increasingly choosing not to live in such communities.

Brown said there has been some interest in the old Trinity Medical Center, which still has some doctors' offices on site. The owners are very interested in selling the property, he said.

"It's costing them to continue to own it," Brown said. "They are going to have to put in significant security in the area to keep it secure."

By early next year, he said he hopes to announce plans for the property.

"A lot of people will feel a lot better when we get something firm that we can talk about," Brown said.

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